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*From Apocalypse
To Awakenings*

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Editorial
Pathfinder and Pointer: Legacies of Gordon Rohlehr



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Tout Moun Volume 2.No.1 October 2013 focuses on the work of UWI Professor Emeritus Gordon Rohlehr in acknowledgement of his contribution as a seminal cultural critic, thinker, educator, and grassroots communicator. After decades of intellectual spade work, Rohlehr is held in high esteem by generations of scholars and students, writers and performers, calypsonians and musicians, teachers and media workers. He represents one of the finest examples of the early cadre of young intellectuals, produced by the then University of the West Indies College of London. Together they set out to craft an indigenous knowledge system which was sufficiently vigorous to withstand the onslaught of imperialism. Over the decades, Rohlehr has grappled with the hope of Caribbean unity and the dashing of that prospect; the potentialities and perils of the independence movement; herculean nation building efforts and recurrent cycles of social unrest, boundless creative energy matched by overwhelming persistence of poverty within the lower strata Afro-Caribbean population; the reckless violence of its young males; the crass materialism of the upper and middle strata; and the insensitive arrogance of the region's political directorate.

Rohlehr has refused to be drawn into narrow parochialism. While he has remained committed to exploring his African ancestry and Afro-Caribbean identity, he is never complicit with ethno-local polarization and adversarial "them and us" stances which intellectuals are often pressured into adopting. He responds to the region's complex of issues and its myriad outcomes and permutations

with a palpable love and connectedness to place and people. This is fused with a stubborn refusal to lose hope, matched by a refusal to idealize and to turn a blind eye; deep grief over numerous crises and enduring faith in power of resurgence.

The aim of this collection of essays is twofold. It is fitting that The University of the West Indies St Augustine's Department of Literary Cultural and Communications Studies, should pay tribute to its distinguished Professor. Rohlehr has shaped the field of Caribbean literary, cultural and calypso research, nurtured generations of scholars and thinkers and spent himself unstintingly. Secondly, although Rohlehr's voluminous output has been published within the Caribbean, it has not had the wide spread distribution that it deserves. Arguably his work very rarely resonates fashionable intellectual approaches and buzz words. Yet, this stubborn insistence that his work be taken on its own terms has had another impact. Within a context in which academic currency so swiftly loses value, Rohlehr's work possesses timelessness. Despite the inherent globality of his outlook and analyses, he has prioritized communicating with and within the regional community. This open access online journal issue is a miniscule step towards enhancing broad-based accessibility to his work.

The title of this volume *From Apocalypse to Awakening* echoes the theme of the 2007 Rohlehr retirement conference - a celebration of his life and work, which, apart from rich academic participation, elicited the involvement of - teachers, in recognition of his contribution to secondary school education and to the work of the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination; media workers in acknowledgment of countless contributions to media-based public education; calypsonians in recognition of his pioneering work in calypso research.

The region's troubled journey from apocalypse to awakenings is referenced in the preface to Rohlehr's *My Strangled City*, a collection of essays which deals with the tumultuous two decades in Caribbean history flanked by the violence of 1970 black power uprising and the 1990 Muslimen insurrections. Both of these farces played themselves out on the fertile soil of Trinidad - the land which the Guyanese-born literary and cultural critic has made his home since 1968. The conversations in this collection deal with what Rohlehr terms the relationship between "catastrophe and awakening both as a central phenomenon of Caribbean history and a recurrent feature of our traumatized present" (*My Strangled City* vii).

The collection opens with Rohlehr's essay "Calypso, Education and Community in Trinidad and Tobago from the 1940s to 2011" which analyses social contexts of the period and the contribution of the nation's messianic first Prime Minister and primary architect of its education system. It focuses on the backchat of the people's philosophers through the lenses of some 100 calypsos which echo or critique "official rhetoric about education, social transformation and community-building".(4) Rohlehr traces the didactic impulse of the committed intelligentsia mobilized by the People's Education Movement (PEM) and the nascent People's National Movement (PNM) aimed at "uplifting and illuminating their less fortunate brethren in the rural and peri-urban borderlands". Calypsonians, "fierce guardians of independent, grass-rooted opinion, assume the right to dialogue, to talk back" (4). Rohlehr points to the gap between Williams's earnest attempt to carve out a curriculum within his constituency of South East Port of Spain and the self-fashioned curriculum of the ever proliferating ghetto - a curriculum generated in a crucible of "constant crisis and survivalism; its alternative economy of cutting and contriving and its own hierarchy of muscle and

blood.” (4) Rohlehr argues that Williams faced a constituency which was impervious to his curriculum comprising “unmanageable rebels, outcasts, knife-and razor technicians, gunslingers and blood-and-sand gladiators ... who have created their own cinematic lifestyles, counter cultural mores, values, modes of earning and granting respect and self-recognition.” (4).

This comprehensive essay is characteristic of Rohlehr's scholarship in terms of its depth, incisiveness, and willingness to grapple with thorny issues. It probes the rupture which destroyed the trust and the tenuous connection between the intelligentsia and the masses during the early Williams years. The essay traces continuities between Williams's early policies and interventions, and flaws in the contemporary educational and social system. These Rohlehr argues include but are not limited to the enduring gap between the prestige schools and the technical vocational stream; the materialistic and self-serving values of the prosperous upper strata and the intelligentsia; and the enduring, violent and self-decimating curriculum of the streets.

The origins, development and legacies of Rohlehr's investment in popular culture, specifically his devotion to the study of calypso as social barometer, is Louis Regis's concern in “Ah Never Get Weary Yet: Gordon Rohlehr's Forty Years in Calypso.” This essay traces Rohlehr's early intellectual formations, the originary moment of his lifelong passion for calypso research, and his initial steps towards crafting a methodology for reading Caribbean society through the lens of calypso. Regis highlights Rohlehr's 1985 contention that “the orality alive in street talk, story-telling and the short story were formally extended and shaped in the novel” and “calypso helped preserve and formalize a certain twist of mind which ... helped in the emergence of Selvon, Naipaul and Lovelace” (12). His methodology for calypso research hammered out over decades, democratically informed by formal training in literary disciplines and gut feeling, is reflective, according to Regis, of Rohlehr's liminal location between literature and history. The resultant multi-pronged methodology which honours the complexity and rootedness of the art form requires researchers to: “familiarise themselves with the techniques of literary criticism; the history, meaning and development of the art-form, including its patterns of performance; the biography of the practitioners; the political and social history of the country; and relevant information about the particular subject being dealt with in the calypsos under examination”. (12) In alignment with the grassroots orientation and world view of the practitioners of the art form, Rohlehr's highly informed, close, “common sense” readings of calypso and society remain, in Regis's assessment, accessible in their “elegant, delightfully readable prose.” (13)

Turning the focus to the emergence of the region's premier tertiary institution and an indigenous intelligentsia, Jean D'Costa dedicates her contribution in “Prophesying from the Rear View Mirror: Recalling the First Sixty Years of the University of the West Indies” to the memory of our people between 1838 and 1938, who through “their lives and labour gave us strength and purpose.” (1) Writing as a child of first generation middle class parent who worked their way up through education from agrarian pursuits to white collar profession of teaching, D'Costa sketches the social framework for the first sixty years of the University of the West Indies. She presents not the official narrative, but the aspirations and hopes of the common people with a focus on multiple, overlapping formations of identity based on community, nation, region, language. The account locates the UWI entering classes of 1948 and beyond as possessed of the “burden of building a future which has existed as a distant passionate impulse in their ancestors.” (8) D'Costa's essay deals with challenges of such a process and its contemporary outcome - the impulse of generations of

scholars in indigenous institutions to explore our world – its communities, languages, social histories, to transcend its numerous adversities, and to produce its leaders and change agents.

Rohlehr's two-part essay "Where is Here? What Jail is This? Who are We?"¹ explores tropes of migration which are inherent to the formation of modern Caribbean societies. He critiques a range of fictional constructions of dislocation, journey, arrival and taking possession of new lands. "Where is here?" Rohlehr argues is the cry of the recent migrant in response to displacement and disorientation, loss of place and the charting of complex cartographies of belonging. The fictional journeys are executed in reality and in dream space, into uncharted futures or back into an imagined past to unearth submerged and suppressed memories. Threaded through the essay is Rohlehr's ingenious tracing of recurrent metaphors of dance. Columbus, Rohlehr indicates is variously portrayed in the literature as discoverer, visionary and failed patriarch, whose inimical intent fails to be masked in the dance he orders his sailors to perform to attract the indigenous inhabitants. The intrepid explorer responds to his estrangement by remapping *his* newly discovered Trinidad into the universe of Christian mythology. In turn Lamming's Pa, the ancestral figure of *In the Castle of my Skin*, journeys back into dreamscapes of the past becoming both "involuntary medium and possessed shaman of a ceremony of mourning and remembrance." (5) Rohlehr reads Walcott's evocation of the legendary First Nation Caribs leapers in *Another Life* as an unwelcome eruption into visibility, which the poet as shaman can only quell through epistemic violence of pounding the presences back into the earth from which they should never have emerged: "The pounding heels of both the running tribe and the genocidal horsemen merge, enter the narrator's head and become his own reluctant, desperately dancing and finally almost ecstatic heels, vainly pounding back into the earth the undead gods that he has raised." (11). In Braithwaite's *Masks*, the Adowa dance signals a moment when the traveler allows the energies and spirits of the earth to enter the body through the feet, to create a moment of groundation and connection with ancestral pathfinders.

Part 2 of the essay touches on a series of writers who grapple with the Walcottian dilemma of "homecoming without home". It begins by reading the quest for home and identity in Dennis Williams's *Other Leopards* whose protagonist Froad, the deracinated and alienated mulatto adrift in Africa begins with disavowal of his ancestry, and ultimately find himself naked and marooned in a thorn tree in the desert awaiting a tomorrow which may have already come. A less agonized protagonist of Olive Senior's "Reaching my Station" is faced at the end of a journey back to her derelict and corrupt village home with the option to "descend or continue travelling". Rohlehr explores the problematics of home for the Jamaican Eurocreole urban middle class in Lalla's *Arch of Fire*. Mired in amnesia and fearful of the encroaching savage Afro-Caribbean mob, the besieged family take recourse in the idyll of repossessing the decaying rural plantation. The incisive essay culminates in an inspired reading of the dancehall experience in Brodber's *Jane and Louisa*, which allows the alienated and desiccated young scholar Nellie to find her way back home to her people. The thrashing amalgam of peoples and presences into which she settles, bridges times, ethnicities and the domains of the living and the dead. The analysis of this text culminates in a statement which is true of the entire corpus of work surveyed in this substantial essay: "No simple formula, whether its origin is the ancestral kumbula of the mountain village, the incestuous pseudo-community of the university campus, the ideologically-obsessed cadre of the politically-minded

'brederen' and 'sistren' can fully explain or contain the ever changing pattern of this movement of New World Peoples" (29)

The documentary segment of *Tout Moun* features Jean Antoine's film *Rivers of Sound: The Life and Work of Rohlehr*. Shot in Trinidad and Guyana, *Rivers of Sound* traces the scholar's formative years and intellectual formations. Utilizing archival footage along with current interviews with friends, family and colleagues, the film provides snapshots of the making of the critic and his stance to the region he loves.

Kwynn Johnson's visual essay "The Surgical Suture and the Embroidered Stitch: - A Visual Project" compiles images of the crises and apocalypse which have occupied Rohlehr for decades. It includes a representation in stitchery of a legendary photograph of the conflagration which engulfed the arches of the historic Police Headquarters building, Port of Spain Trinidad, during the 1990 attempted coup. Echoing the title of Rohlehr's essay collection *The Shape of That Hurt* which features the said photograph as its book cover, Johnson aptly titles her stitchery "The Shape of Rohlehr's Hurt." These images come out of a larger body of work created in 2009 for a solo exhibition titled *Red, appropriated*. The visual project locates societal traumas and racial hegemonies as features that have not only constructed the Caribbean in the world, but also continue to find a place in Caribbean modernity.

The short fiction featured in this collection trace the same themes. Jewel Fraser's "Hewers of Wood" set in Barbados, explores the persistence of the interpersonal dynamics of plantation culture in the new industry for selling the Caribbean - tourism. An Afro-Barbadian hotel manager rejects a white candidate who is clearly the most appropriate job applicant because of the trauma of his own rejection by the young man's father in a similar scenario decades earlier. This subtle narrative of a commonplace event demonstrates the enduring nature of race and colour prejudices and how they perpetuate themselves and become engrained in institutional structures inter-generationally.

Jean D'Costa's "Orange Myrtle" is a coming of age narrative in which a sheltered child of a loving family is schooled in harsh cruelties of social and familial relations in Jamaica in the 1940s. The story steeped in community pride and self-affirmation, tells of the devastating impact of loss of rootedness in place and family and the cruelties that siblings in pursuit of upward mobility and social standing can mete out to their less fortunate brother. Roland the handyman of Nelson Piece finds a caring extended family having been evicted from rural parental home by avaricious brothers who claim that he has not been mentioned in his parent's will. Under the guise of doing yard work, he comes to care for the child's ailing mother who succumbs to cancer. Roland unable to rise above rejection and loss, eventually kills himself. This powerful narrative which is constantly shifting in time reflects the associative connections of memory, captures a child's sensibility and mourns the loss of innocence and the passing of slower times when rooted communities were clear on who they were, what values they stood for, who deserved their intense loyalties, and what demarcated their belonging.

The interview segment "From Apocalypse to Awakenings: Conversations with Gordon Rohlehr" by Paula Morgan is presented in video as one of the Voice Tracks series (20 minutes), with an expanded version in print. Rohlehr explores cycles of crises and awakenings as exemplary of Caribbean emergence from the traumas of colonialism in cyclic processes of violent change which

erupted in roughly 20 year cycles since the 1880s in Trinidad and Tobago. In this interview Rohlehr invokes the notion of history as duppy – a maligned, unburied and unplaced spirit of the past. Adverse material life conditions are suffered by a substantial cross section of Caribbean populations who, after two hundred years since the abolition of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, have still not conquered cycles of poverty, dispossession, denigration and destiny malaise. The restlessness and anguish stirred up by this malignant duppy plays its self out in communal grief, deep rooted discontent, deferred dreams, wasted lives, culminating in violent social dramas of riotous unrest and bloodshed. Despite the tremendous capacity of our societies to normalize trauma, in the case of Trinidad through the Carnavalesque, periodically a fissure erupts. Rohlehr envisions creative writers and critics as engaged in a work of therapeutic intervention of exorcising the ghost of history in the hope that the violent cycles can be interrupted, the originary violations redressed and the eruptive body politic can find rest. He attributed the contemporary savage violence particularly among the urban folk to what he terms a “culture of terminality” which seems to have no rules, no regard for even its own life” The collection closes with Jean Antoine’s penetrative review essay on Rohlehr’s *Transgression, Transition, and Transformation*.

Together these essays, documentary, visual presentation, interviews and creative expressions pay small tribute to Rohlehr’s lifelong intellectual project. In closing, I claim and refashion the words of Da Costa’s dedication “in his honour, we remain keepers and explorers of his legacy”.

Profile – Gordon Rohlehr



Barbara Lalla

In becoming Professor Emeritus even before retirement, Professor Gordon Rohlehr once and for all “unclichéd” the descriptor of *living legend* in our world of Caribbean letters and popular culture. His encyclopedic and state of the art knowledge of both oral and literary culture, and his passionate regional consciousness have rendered him invaluable as a resource on Calypso, oral history, gender issues, social violence and national consciousness. His values ensure a model of humanity and a sense of integrity from which to debate topics such as the construction of masculinity. And then his humour – fearless, wicked, yet unfailingly decent and compassionate – who but Gordon in an address on the Mulatto in *West Indian Literature* would produce a title like “The Attitude of Their Mulattitude”?

Guyanese by birth but (by absorption) Trini to de bone, and Caribbean by creed, Gordon Rohlehr nailed the University College of London Mona scholarship in 1961 and, after regular Student of the Year prizes (among other awards), graduated with First Class Honours in English in 1964. This led smoothly to a UWI Overseas Postgraduate Award and he completed his doctorate at the University of Birmingham in 1967. His topic was: "Alienation and Commitment in the Works of Joseph Conrad". Beginning as Assistant Lecturer at UWI in 1968, he achieved a personal Chair by 1985.

Since then he has been increasingly in demand for distinguished lectures and addresses, from Guyana to Stanford and Senegal; and for citations and tributes, from one for Slinger Francisco ("Sparrow") in Trinidad to that on Wilson Harris in Belgium - not to mention a brilliantly titled tribute to Fr Michel de Verteuil - "Oh Lord, Shave Thy People". He has served tirelessly as judge in essay, debating and calypso competitions and awards; generously spoken at book launchings; participated in radio and television programmes on everything from Growling Tiger to Chinese Immigration, from Calypso picong, to malice in political commentary, from Creole in West Indian Literature to heroes of our culture. Through every medium he has shared unreservedly his amazing breadth, depth and supersensitivity of mind.

His range of teaching has been extraordinary - West Indian prose and verse at undergraduate and graduate levels, Creative Writing, and British Literature. He has supervised and examined countless research studies from undergraduate final year Caribbean Studies to doctoral dissertations. His past graduate students in Literature and Cultural Studies include such well known names as Anson Gonzales, Paula Morgan, Philip Lamont, Wayne Kublalsingh, Marina Omowale Maxwell, Jean Antoine, Louis Regis and Bruce Paddington.

His own prolific research has surfaced through *Pathfinder: Black Awakening in the Arrivants of Edward Kamau Brathwaite* (co-edited with Mervyn Morris and Stewart Brown) and *Voiceprint: An Anthology of Oral and Related Verse from the Caribbean*, in the '80s. In the '90s appeared *My Strangled City and Other Essays*, *The Shape of that Hurt and Other Essays*, and *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*. Most recently, *A Scuffling of Islands: Essays on Calypso* appeared in 2004, *Transgression, Transition and Transformation* (2007). Well over 100 published articles spread themselves over Calypso from every angle, but also cover Brathwaite, Cricket, Lamming, Rudder, Folk Research, Naipaul, Sparrow, Caribbean aesthetics, Eric Williams, Blues, Lloyd Best, Soca, CLR James, apart from countless conference presentations. His critical practice, playful yet nurturing, shatters oppressive intellectual regimes amidst which new cultural forms put forth transgressive shoots.

Always a proponent of rigorous textual analysis in favour of more theoretical ponderings, he has nevertheless shaped a theory of the folk in West Indian criticism, in relation to urban and rural cultures, Afro- and Indo- Caribbean populations, in relation to the works of Lamming, Walcott and Brathwaite, in relation to linguistic and social continua and in relation to versions of history. In the course of his investigations, he has interrogated issues central to cutting edge theoretical enquiry like psychic loss in the overwhelming reality of big city life. His scholarship in both Literature and Cultural Studies is framed in an approach to history that integrates surgical incisiveness with ridicule and forgiveness.

Internationally recognized as Fulbright Scholar at Johns Hopkins University; Mellon Foundation Scholar to Tulane University and visiting scholar at the Universities of Harvard, Pittsburgh and Toronto, and at Dartmouth College, Professor Rohlehr has rendered selfless service to UWI own as Department Head, Moderator of Caribbean Studies, and Member of countless committees; and he has served on the UWI Press Advisory Committee and as advisor on international student exchanges. Indeed, his reputation has attracted students and scholars to UWI from localities as diverse as Martinique and Iowa USA. He has also taken the academy into the community in addresses to secondary schools (from Lakshmi Girls, to ORC, to Signal Hill Comprehensive), and to Methanol workers in Point Lisas. He has given National service as an advisor in the National Heritage Library and served in back breaking tasks such as Chief Examiner in the Caribbean Examinations Council, and member of the Textbook Evaluation Committee.

It is to the credit of UWI that Professor Rohlehr's work was recognized, in 1994, through the Vice Chancellor's Award for Excellence in the combined areas of Teaching, Administration, Research and Public Service. His international recognition prompts interviews by reporters (from the Guardian to those of the BBC), by musicologists, students and commentators on culture from Australia, Canada, Norway, St Vincent, Texas, India and Austria. (Indeed, one such interview has been translated into Danish.)

All this has been possible in the light of his enthusiasm and his welcoming disposition. Gordon's worst kept secret is his unprecedented kindness and generosity - purchasing books to assist graduate students from his own pocket; sharing awards with people he felt to have contributed to his success and who in their assessment were merely doing their job, sharing publishable ideas with junior staff and congratulating them afterwards on their initiative, so overjoyed at the success of others as to embrace (after an excellent Oral Examination) not only the successful student but her supportive husband.

This big-hearted embrace of individuals on the one hand and of the diversity of our region on the other has enabled an enhanced understanding not only of literature and culture but also of Caribbean identity, has furthered intellectual emancipation, and has cherished personal fulfillment.

All this is why Gordon Rohlehr is larger than life. There are great scholars in other places, and some are great at the expense of others. There are students in universities across the world, who, on encountering a scholar of world repute, actually "find demselves in the hand of a cannibal head hunter." And then, there are those who meet Gordon.

ⁱ This essay has been published in *Transgression, Transition, Transformation* by Gordon Rohlehr (Trinidad: Lexicon Ltd 2012). It is reproduced here in keeping with the objective of this journal issue as explained earlier.